

BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENTATION SUICIDE IN THE BHAGAVAD-GITA

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A RELEVANT TOPIC

The desire to live and the desire to die are some of the most basic primal concerns of the living entities in this material world. As suicide or the desire to die is a very topical subject today, we wanted to show how the *Bhagavad-gītā* has a relevant message on this issue.¹

Yearly there are over one million people in the world who commit suicide. This is more than the combined annual deaths from all homicides and wars.² In 2007 suicide was the third leading cause of death in America amongst young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four.³ In India approximately every three seconds someone tries to take their life.⁴ For this reason India is considered by some authorities to be the modern suicide capital of the world.⁵

The topic of suicide in the Gaudiya Vaishnava literature is vast and would be a worthy subject for a doctoral thesis if someone wanted to fully fluff it out. This is especially true if we analyze the issue also in terms of *gaura-līlā*, which is another higher subject we won't go into here. Our discussion at this point is from the perspective of *Bhagavad-gītā*. The *Gītā* does not directly mention suicide in any of its verses, however if one considers the matter, the essential point of suicide can be found throughout Krishna's teachings to Arjuna.

DEFINITIONS

The English word suicide has several common meanings: 1. The intentional killing of oneself; 2. A self-destructive action or course (such as political suicide); 3. The destruction of one's own interests or prospects.⁶

In Sanskrit “*ātma-hā*”⁷ or “*ātma-vadha*” means suicide. “*Hā*” means to give up; lose; disregard etc. “*Vadha*” means killing or annihilation. “*Ātma*” has a number of meanings, including:

- * The soul
- * The self
- * The material body
- * The understanding, intellect, and mind.⁸

From this it is clear that the concept of suicide in both Western and Vedic cultures has multiple meanings.

SIX WAYS TO UNDERSTAND

In his *Paramātmā Sandarbha* (105.6) Srila Jiva Goswami describes, षड्विधेन लिङेन तात्पर्यम् अपि पर्यालोच्यते — there are six ways to understand a book. He cites a verse from *Bṛhat-saṁhitā* to substantiate the point:⁹

*upakramopasaṁhārāv abhyāso 'pūrvatā phalam
arthavādopapattī ca liṅgaṁ tātparyā-nirṇayaḥ*

[The six ways to understand the meaning of a book are:]

- 1) *upakrama* — the author's preamble
- 2) *upasaṁhārau* — the author's concluding words
- 3) *abhyāsa* — what is repeated by the author again and again in the course of the book

- 4) *apūrvatā-phalam* — or what is unique to the book and not found in other books
- 5) *artha-vāda* — the author's own declaration of his intent in writing the book, and
- 6) *upapattī* — the application of logic to understand the author's intention.

Let's apply these six considerations to the concept of suicide in the *Bhagavad-gītā*:

1) The Preamble

The *upakrama* or preamble of the *Bhagavad-gītā* is the first chapter. This chapter is often called *viśāda-yoga*, or the yoga of lamentation. Why does this chapter have such a title when there is no mention of yoga in it? Because Arjuna's and the living entities' lamentation gives rise to Krishna explaining yoga.

Facing the prospect of having to kill his friends and relatives, Arjuna becomes overwhelmed with material distress. With his words to Krishna in text 30, he voices the primordial cry of the suffering living entity in this material world:

*na ca śaknomy avasthātum bhramatīva ca me manaḥ
nimittāni ca paśyāmi viparītāni keśava*

I am now unable to stand here any longer. I am forgetting myself, and my mind is reeling. I see only causes of misfortune, O Krishna, killer of the Keshi demon.

This intense existential crisis manifesting in lamentation culminates in Arjuna's desire to do away with his existence as expressed in the last verses of the chapter:

*yadi mām apratīkāram aśāstram śastra-pāṇayaḥ
dhārtarāṣṭrā raṇe hanyus tan me kṣemataram bhavet*

Better for me if the sons of Dhritarashtra, weapons in hand, were to kill me unarmed and unresisting on the battlefield. (Text 45)

*sañjaya uvāca
evam uktvārjunaḥ saṅkhye rathopastha upāviśat
viśrjya sa-śaram cāpaṁ śoka-saṁvigna-mānasaḥ*

Sanjaya said: Arjuna, having thus spoken on the battlefield, cast aside his bow and arrows and sat down on the chariot, his mind overwhelmed with grief. (46)

In his *Gītā-bhūṣaṇa* commentary on text 45, Srila Baladev Vidyabhushan describes the depth of Arjuna's anguish, bewilderment, and his thoughts on voluntarily giving up his body:

kṣemataram atihitam prāṇānta-prāyaścittenaivaitat pāpāvamarjanam

Not opposing them [and thereby dying at their hands] will be my *prāyaścitta*, atonement, for the sin of even thinking of killing relatives. This is most beneficial (*kṣemataram*) since the atonement of death will wash away all sins.

As an eternal associate of the Lord, Arjuna is not really suffering. By Krishna's desire, *yoga-māyā* is covering Arjuna who is playing the role of a conditioned soul. By teaching Arjuna, Krishna is really teaching *us* by the method known as *śākhā-candra-nyāya* — "the logic of the branch and the moon." [See *Cc. madhya* 20.248] When a mother asks the child if he can see the moon, he says, "Where is it? Show me."

The mother then points to a tree, "Do you see that tree?"

"Yes", says the child.

"Do you see the branch?"

"Yes".

“There, just at the end of the branch you can see the moon.”

The mother’s purpose is not to show the branch. Her purpose is to show the moon. She only uses the branch to indicate the real object she wants to show. Similarly, Krishna’s real purpose was to convey the message of *Bhagavad-gītā* to all of mankind, but he achieved that through speaking it to Arjuna.

In conclusion regarding the *upakrama*: The introduction to the *Gītā* is lamentation, the climax of which is that Arjuna no longer wants to live. This desire to escape the pain of this world by ending it all is a primal yearning of the spirit soul who is out of his element in the material sphere, and is an elemental aspect of the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

2) The Conclusion

Next, Jiva Goswami teaches, we should examine the *upasamhārau*, or conclusion of the book. Srila Prabhupada writes in his purport to *Bhagavad-gītā* 12.6-7:

The conclusion of *Bhagavad-gītā* is stated in the Eighteenth Chapter:

*sarva-dharmān parityajya mām ekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja
ahaṁ tvāṁ sarva-pāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ [Bg. 18.66]*

Krishna’s *upasamhārau*, conclusion of the *Gītā*, as shown in 18.66 is that one should abandon all varieties of *dharma* and surrender everything to Him. If one does so then they will be free from all sin. In his grief of lamentation expressed in the first chapter of the *Gītā*, Arjuna felt that the only way he could be purified of the sins gained by even thinking of killing his family members was to take his own life. In this concluding point of the *Gītā*, Krishna teaches him, “No, indulging in the supremely selfish activity of killing your body won’t purify you of your sins. Rather, you should kill your material existence — commit material suicide by giving up everything for me — and *I* will free you from your sinful reactions.”

3) What is Repeatedly Stated

The third criterion for understanding a book is *abhyāsa*, or what is repeatedly stated by the author. Throughout the *Gītā*, again and again, Krishna emphasizes to Arjuna that he must sacrifice mundane social considerations, his false ego and his own interests, and instead act for his (Krishna’s) pleasure. Acting for the destruction of all these things is a form of suicide.

A few of the many examples from *Bhagavad-gītā*:

* In *Gītā* 2.71, Arjuna is advised that only a person who has given up all desires for sense gratification [committed material suicide], who lives free from desires, who has given up all sense of proprietorship and is devoid of false ego can attain real peace.

* *Gītā* 5.6 describes: “Merely renouncing all activities [simply committing social suicide] yet not engaging in the devotional service of the Lord cannot make one happy. But a thoughtful person engaged in devotional service [who gave up his material life] can achieve the Supreme without delay.”

* In *Gītā* 5.8-9, Krishna explains the symptoms of a person in divine consciousness. [Because they have committed suicide by finishing off their material life and renouncing their desires] they are aloof from the senses and the sense objects. In the words of Bhaktivinod Thakur, they have died to live.

* In *Gītā* 6.10, 13.11, and 18.51-53, Krishna tells Arjuna to give up association with materialistic persons (which is suicide of one’s mundane social life).

* In *Gītā* 9.34, and 18.65, Arjuna is advised to commit suicide by ending his illusory material life, and thus completely engage his mind and become totally absorbed in Krishna.

* In *Gītā* 11.55, Krishna says *mat-karma-kṛṇ mat-paramo ... yaḥ sa mām eti pāṇḍava* — “One who makes me the supreme goal of his life [in other words, whose material goals, whose material life is finished] is sure to come to me.” Srila Prabhupada comments: “this verse is considered to be the essence of *Bhagavad-gītā*.”

* In *Gītā* 12.6-7, Krishna recommends worshiping Him and giving up all of one's activities [committing suicide] for Him (Krishna).

4) What is Unique

The third criterion for understanding a book is *apūrvatā-phalam*, or what is unique to the book. Although there are many Vedic literatures describing various processes of purification and elevation, the *Gītā* is unique in that Krishna is recommending complete surrender as described in 18.66 cited above. Again, our point is that this surrender is a kind of suicide. It means giving up one's material life and acting solely for the pleasure of the Lord.

5) The Author's Intention

The fifth criterion for understanding a book is *artha-vāda*, or understanding the stated intention of the author. In this case we again refer to Krishna's words in the eighteenth chapter of the *Gītā*, "Abandon everything and just surrender to me". Clearly, the *artha-vāda*, the stated intention or ultimate solution of the author of the *Gītā*, Sri Krishna is material suicide.

6) Applying Logic to Understand

The sixth and final criterion for understanding a book is *upapattī*, or applying logic. Logic or thinking is not wrong, rather it is very much wanted in spiritual life. What is rejected is mundane speculation that is not based on *śāstra*.

Since this world is always changing the exact application of Krishna consciousness will also change. In the second chapter of *Jaiva Dharma*, Srila Thakur Bhaktivinoda discusses two types of actions of great souls, which he refers to as *tat-kālīka* and *sarva-kālīka*. *Tat-kālīka* refers to acts which are specific for a certain time, place and circumstance, while *sarva-kālīka* refers to absolute considerations that are always constant.

Srila Prabhupada has stated in the book *Renunciation through Wisdom* (2.3):

The Lord's devotees can save even those whom the Lord himself rejects. This is their unique character. Therefore, the devotees of the Lord arrange various means to save the fallen, reprobate souls from perdition. In fact, they live among these spiritual derelicts to encourage them toward spiritual perfection, using any means at hand — even tricks. His Divine Grace Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur Prabhupada wanted to open a students' hostel in London, the logic being that it was necessary to give sugar-coated pills, in the form of a little sense gratification, to those debauched students in order to attract them to the path of God-realization.

The "tricks" one might apply to encourage fallen souls towards spiritual perfection are *tat-kālīka* — that which may change according to the time, place, and the conditioned living entities' current needs; and *sarva-kālīka* — acts which are universally applicable in all time and circumstance such as the chanting of Krishna's names as the absolute necessity in this age. To understand which action is *tat-kālīka*, and which is *sarva-kālīka*, requires the application of logic based on *śāstra* and the teachings of our *ācāryas*. Our discussion on suicide in the *Bhagavad-gītā* was based upon this *upapattī*, or application of logic.

FIVE ESSENTIAL POINTS

In his introduction to the *Gītā*, Srila Prabhupada has described the five essential points of the *Gītā*:

Īśvara (the Supreme Lord), *jīva* (the living entity), *prakṛti* (nature), *kāla* (eternal time) and karma (activity) are all explained in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Does the *Gītā* speak about suicide in relation to these five essential points?

The Supreme Lord

In his purport to *Gītā* 4.11, Srila Prabhupada states:

The pure devotees both here and in the transcendental abode associate with Him in person and are able to render personal service to the Lord and thus derive transcendental bliss in His loving service. As for those who

are impersonalists and who want to commit spiritual suicide by annihilating the individual existence of the living entity, Krishna helps also by absorbing them into His effulgence. Such impersonalists do not agree to accept the eternal, blissful Personality of Godhead; consequently they cannot relish the bliss of transcendental personal service to the Lord, having extinguished their individuality.

The *Gītā* and its commentaries teach us that impersonalism is a kind of spiritual suicide wherein one destroys his relationship with *Īśvara*, the Lord by annihilating their individual existence.

The Living Entity

The *Bhagavad-gītā* teaches that due to material lamentation the *jīva* forgets his eternal identity. He loses the desire for God realization and neglects his spiritual responsibility in this human form of life, thus effectively committing a kind of suicide. Such a person is referred to throughout the Vedic literature as "*ātma-hā*", or "the killer of the soul".

Material Nature, Time, and Action

The *Bhagavad-gītā* teaches that one should abandon attachment to the material body and to *prakṛti*, this material nature. Abandoning *prakṛti* or material life means destruction of one's mundane interests or prospects — suicide.

This material world is based on time. In the spiritual world, time is conspicuous by its absence. In the *Gītā*, Krishna repeatedly advocates to Arjuna that this material world, and thereby time, should be given up. Again — suicide by renouncing one's mundane interests and prospects.

Krishna's final instruction to Arjuna in the *Gītā* is to give up all types of action and simply depend on the Lord — complete renunciation, or suicide.

CONCLUSION

The desire for death may manifest in different forms:

* Based on the understanding that I am this body, suicide means the desire to arrange that one's body is killed.

* Based on the understanding that I am this body, one neglects spiritual life. Such a person is called *ātma-hā* or a killer of the soul.

* Based on the understanding that I am the soul, suicide means giving up material life and surrendering to Krishna. In the language of Thakur Bhaktivinode, such a person should "die to live".

* At that point, social suicide may be committed, when one surrenders their life to guru and Krishna and starts "living alone", solely with guru and Krishna.

* Based on the impersonal conception, suicide means the living entities desire to merge with the Lord or his effulgence.

* Someone may have some understanding of *ātma-tattva* or the science of the self, but due to weakness of heart they may neglect hearing topics of Krishna and instead focus on mundane subjects, thereby committing suicide or *ātma-hā*.

Śāstra and our *ācāryas* have stressed again and again the need of giving up sense gratification and material life before one can come to Krishna consciousness. For many people, the closest they may come to that deep-seated feeling of renunciation of material life is when they consider the sinful act of taking their life by killing their body.

Arjuna's example teaches that in the depth of despondency one can forget oneself. Unable to deal with the pain of life, one may desire to end it all by suicide. Krishna's answer to Arjuna throughout the *Gītā* is to encourage him not to commit suicide of the body by allowing himself to be killed by the Kauravas, nor to commit spiritual suicide by desiring to merge with the Lord — rather he should commit material

suicide and die to live.

These are some humble thoughts on how the *Gītā* and Srila Prabhupada's teachings have a great relevance for persons who — seeing only despair and darkness — seek freedom from pain in the embrace of death. If this brings some inspiration, encouragement, or pleasure to the devotees of the Lord then we will consider our endeavor successful.

NOTES

¹ A recording of the talk can be downloaded here: <http://audio.iskcondesiretree.info/03 - ISKCON Prabhujis/ISKCON Prabhujis - K to R/His Grace Madhavananda Prabhu/Various/Madhavananda Pr Various - Suicide in the Bhagavad Gita - 2012-06-08.mp3>

² <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1071203.html>

See also:

http://www.afsp.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.viewpage&page_id=050fea9f-b064-4092-b1135c3a70de1fda

³ <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/suicide-in-the-us-statistics-and-prevention/index.shtml>

⁴ <http://www.aasra.info/articlesandstatistics.html>

⁵ <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=54057>

⁶ English definitions here are from *Oxford Dictionary* and *Dictionary.com*.

⁷ Srila Prabhupada writes in his purport to *Bhāg.* 4.23.28

The wives of the demigods condemn the performers of sense gratificatory activities as *vañcita*, cheated. Those so engaged are actually killing themselves (*ātma-hā*). As stated in *Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* (11.20.17):

*nṛ-deham ādyaṁ sulabhaṁ sudurlabhaṁ
plavaṁ sukalpaṁ guru-karṇadhāraṁ
mayānukūlena nabhasvateritaṁ
pumān bhavābhim na taret sa ātma-hā*

When one wants to cross a large ocean, he requires a strong boat. It is said that this human form of life is a good boat by which one can cross the ocean of nescience. In the human form of life one can obtain the guidance of a good navigator, the spiritual master. One also gets a favorable wind by the mercy of Krishna, and that wind is the instructions of Krishna. The human body is the boat, the instructions of Lord Krishna are the favorable winds, and the spiritual master is the navigator. The spiritual master knows well how to adjust the sails to catch the winds favorably and steer the boat to its destination. If, however, one does not take advantage of this opportunity, one wastes the human form of life. Wasting time and life in this way is the same as committing suicide.

⁸ Sanskrit to English definitions here are from *Monier Williams Sanskrit to English Dictionary*.

⁹ The fact that this verse is also quoted by Baladev Vidyabhushan in his *Prameya-ratnāvali* (4.2), and in his *Govinda-bhāṣya* commentary on *Vedānta-sūtra* (1.2.2) substantiates that the points made therein are very important.

¹⁰ The concepts of *tat-kālika* and *sarva-kālika* are described by Thakur Bhaktivinode in chapter two of *Jaiva Dharma*.